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# Depoliticization “from Below”: Everyday Humanitarianism in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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This paper explores how the boundary between humanitarianism and politics was reproduced in the everyday life in a Bosnia and Herzegovina town. It addresses the use of (post)Yugoslav ideas about humaneness as an apolitical core surrounded by layers of socio-political identities in the course of humanitarian actions. The paper suggests that the depoliticization of humanitarian actions allowed people to distance themselves from the hegemonic understanding of politics as interest-oriented management of ethno-national groups. Those who needed humanitarian help relied on depoliticizing discourses of humaneness to assert their (political) claims to survival and wellbeing in the context marked by the dominance of ethno-nationalist rhetoric.

Keywords: humanitarianism, depoliticization, redistribution, recognition, Bosnia and Herzegovina

## INTRODUCTION

Milica Žarković’s sister needed a bone marrow transplant. Milica, a retail worker in her mid-20s, raised 100,000 KM (approximately 50,000 EUR) in Brčko and Bijeljina, over the course of several months, to take her sister to Vienna for surgery. When we talked about her *humanitarna akcija* (humanitarian action), Milica said that:

That was unbelievable, all three religions in Brčko, everybody gave money. [...] For instance, a man, a Muslim... I can’t believe it, he is like, a very powerful man (*vrlo jak čovjek*), all doors are open to him... He called me and told me that whatever I may need, I should ask him for help. [...] I called him only twice, I can’t really call people all the time.

In this example, Milica used an instance of humanitarian help given across ethno-national boundaries to illustrate the idea that humanitarian actions were apolitical: if “all three religions” were involved, if “everybody gave

money" for her sister's bone marrow transplant, then her humanitarian action could not have been political. Hundreds, if not thousands, of people were involved in all three humanitarian actions I followed during my fieldwork in Bijeljina in 2009 and 2010 (which I describe in more detail in Brković 2014, 2016). Different people said that they donated a small amount of money to the family in need for various reasons – some did it out of religious obligation, others because they had a family member in a similar situation, some felt responsibility towards their friends, while others simply wanted to go to a humanitarian sport game or a humanitarian music concert.<sup>1</sup>

Both those who helped and those who needed help made efforts to depoliticize the three *humanitarne akcije*. For instance, Marko, a waiter, and Ana, a former retail worker, raised 11,000 KM (approximately 5,500 EUR) to take their baby son Nikola, born with premature retinopathy, to a specialist eye clinic in Moscow. Just like Milica's, their humanitarian action lasted for several months and was organized with the help of various people. There seemed to be nothing overtly or covertly political in their endeavors for anyone I talked with: the boy needed a medical procedure he could not get in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) so people donated money to Marko and Ana to help him. Asking Marko and Ana whether there was anything remotely political in their humanitarian action seemed to be offensive: theirs and the donors' humaneness (*ljudskost* or *čovječnost*) seemed to be at stake. They thought that people who would attempt to achieve political goals through humanitarian actions were "non-humans" (*neljudi*).

The claims that humanitarian actions were not political reflect post-Yugoslav perceptions of humaneness, as well as local ideas about *politika* (politics) as an arena of immorality. In order for Ana and Marko to perceive and to present to others their humanitarian need as pure and just, it could not have had anything in common with the "dirty" world of politics. Speaking in very broad terms, depoliticizing discourses in humanitarianism, development, policy, or theories of the public sphere have been critically approached as techniques for deepening social inequalities, or preserving the status quo in a particular social context. What would then be the motivation of people who needed humanitarian help during my fieldwork to present their activities as apolitical? One interpretation could be that they did so because of false consciousness – they were not aware of the true material and institutional processes in BiH in the past twenty years, such as the restructuring of public healthcare and insurance regulations, which left them without access to the required healthcare and which pushed them to rely on the compassion and

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<sup>1</sup> Despite all these different directions of moral reasoning, interpersonal relationships were particularly important for the success of humanitarian actions – most donors seemed to be able to find a personal link to the family in need, directly, via mutual friends, or institutions such as schools or workplaces (see Brković 2014, 2016).

goodwill of other people. However, Marko, Ana, Milica, and other people who initiated humanitarian actions often blamed "the state" and "the system" for their misfortune. They seemed to be aware that humanitarian actions did not exist in this particular form before the war (because healthcare abroad used to be covered by public healthcare insurance) and that a large number of BiH citizens (more than 20%) were left without any healthcare insurance after 1995 (Salihbašić 2008). Another interpretative avenue would be to take my interlocutors' comments at face value and to suggest that their *humanitarne akcije* were, indeed, non-political and that any attempt to describe them as a matter of politics would be an analytical imposition (Candea 2011). However, this would also require disregarding diverse scales of political meaning and practice, as well as ignoring ongoing discussions about what politics is, or what it should be. Namely, in BiH and other former Yugoslav countries there are different, sometimes conflicting, ideas about politics and related, struggles to widen, narrow, and shift the scope of the political as a concept and as a practice (see Hodges and Stubbs 2016; Hodges 2015; Mikuš 2015; Rethmann 2015; Arsenijević 2014; Bilić 2012; Kurtović 2011). Instead of accepting one of those notions of the political (and hence of the non-political) as legitimate, in this paper I look at how the boundary between *politika* (politics) and humanitarianism was reproduced, despite dissatisfactions and criticisms.

This paper suggests that the attempts to depoliticize humanitarian actions "from below" were political acts through which "the weak" – that is, those who needed humanitarian help – asserted their claims to survival and wellbeing in a context marked by the dominance of ethno-nationalist rhetoric. These instances of depoliticization offered a way to distance oneself from the understanding of *politika* (politics) as interest-oriented management of ethno-national groups, which was pervasive in BiH (see Helms 2007; Henig 2016; Jansen 2010; Jouhanneau 2016; Kolind 2008). In other words, depoliticization "from below" opened up a space to make a claim to survival, wellbeing, and better public healthcare (which may be interpreted as political from some perspectives, see Arsenijević 2014), while avoiding the dominant ethno-national idiom through which most political discussions, and governmental and administrative bodies in BiH were (and are) organized.<sup>2</sup> With this, humanitarian actions also reinstated hegemonic notions about

<sup>2</sup> In particular, this refers to the fact that the current BiH administrative structure is the result of the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement, which consolidated two entities in the state of BiH – the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (with the Bosniak and Croat population as the majority) and the Republic of Srpska (with the Serb population as the majority) – as well as the entity-neutral Brčko district. The labyrinthine structure of BiH state administrations is thus simultaneously a confirmation of the "national order of things" and a strategy of overcoming it (Bougarel et al. 2007: 6). If we take this into account, it does not come as a surprise that BiH has thirteen ministries of healthcare: two ministries for the two BiH entities, ten ministries in ten cantons of one of the entities (in the Federation), and one ministry in the

politics which circulated in BiH in 2009 and 2010. The alternatives which were opened up by the depoliticization of the humanitarian need adopted the grammar of the *politika* framework and therefore they did not mean much in terms of large-scale social change. This was “unlikely to do more than marginally affect the various forms of exploitation” (Scott 1985: 29–30) by prolonging one’s life or improving one’s wellbeing.

Let us first turn to the (post)Yugoslav vernacular universalist ideas about humaneness, before exploring how such ideas were utilized “from below”.

### **(POST)YUGOSLAV IDEAS ABOUT HUMANITY: AN APOLITICAL HUMAN CORE SURROUNDED BY SOCIO-POLITICAL IDENTITIES**

After a humanitarian concert organized for a child with multiple developmental difficulties in Bijeljina, I went for a drink with a young couple, Marija and Milan. Marija had been at the concert with me, while Milan had not. Marija said she could not imagine *not* going, since she worked with children with autism regularly. She was a practicing Orthodox Christian, and she saw herself ethno-nationally as a Serb, but in this case she did not mention religion or ethnic nationality as reasons for humanitarian giving, but her professional occupation. Milan decided not to go since the concert was organized by a political party. Furthermore, the president of the party had done despicable things towards the non-Serbian population of their town during the war – Milan said that the president refused to give a glass of water to a Muslim woman who needed it. He said he could not attend a humanitarian concert knowing that it was organized by someone who was not a *čovjek* (literally: human), meaning a *decent* human being.

Similar ideas about the concept of “a human being” (*čovjek*) were frequently evoked in everyday conversations during my fieldwork. For instance, people would say “That is human” (*to je ljudski*), using an adjective, if they thought that an act, or a person, was morally worthy. Similarly, they would proclaim that “She is not a human” (*ona nije čovjek*) in order to suggest that a person was not morally worthy – rather than that a person was not a member of the human race. Since the notion of a *čovjek* was a moral category, most people in BiH thought that it should be enough to simply say a “human” (*čovjek*), instead of “a good human” (*dobar čovjek*). There was a clear difference between the biological meaning of humanity – the *Homo sapiens* species – and the moral meaning of a “human”, as represented in

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Brčko district (self-governing, entity-neutral administrative unit). There is no ministry of healthcare that covers the whole territory of the country.

Figure 1, which states: “Every human is a Homo sapiens, but not every Homo sapiens is a human”.



Figure 1. Source: Facebook

This vernacular understanding of who among the Homo sapiens species could be a “human” was not specific to BiH, but shared across the SFRY and post-Yugoslav contexts. For instance, Milan Kangrga (2010), a Praxis<sup>3</sup> member and a philosopher of ethics from Croatia, articulated the relationship between nationality and the notion of a “human” in the following way:

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<sup>3</sup> *Praxis* was the Marxist humanist philosophical movement which developed in the Socialist Federalist Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) starting in the 1960s.

Being only a Croat – means not yet being human. [...] A nationalist is an immature human.<sup>4</sup>

Using the words *yet* and *immature*, Kangrga indicates that a “human” presents a moral project. Every human is a *Homo sapiens*, but humaneness (*ljudskost*, *čovječnost*) has to be developed and nurtured. Thus, in (post)Yugoslav contexts becoming a human is not a given, but “a painstaking process that takes a lifetime” (Kangrga 2010).<sup>5</sup> One was not simply born as a human (even though some people might have been born with more humaneness in them than others). It was something that had to be learnt from life experience and from one’s mistakes.

This notion of humaneness relates in a specific way to other forms of identity, such as ethno-nationality or religion. Kangrga does not suggest that Croats are not humans, but that being *only* nationally defined is insufficient to qualify as a fully developed human being. In (post)Yugoslav contexts, humaneness is imagined as a core which is surrounded by nationality, religion, class, or gender and age. In other words, humaneness is imagined as a shared, universal, apolitical essence surrounded by layers of politically relevant identities.

To be a human (*biti čovjek*) meant that a person is able to go beyond the constraints of particular socio-political identities and to treat people of other nationalities, religions, classes, age groups, genders, and so forth with basic human decency. People who fail to look beyond the constraints of particular socio-political identities cannot reach their humanity properly. For instance, the president of the political party who refused a glass of water to the Muslim woman just because she was a Muslim, reasoned on the basis of religion and ethno-nationality. From Milan’s perspective, this politician failed to recognize the human core that he shared with the woman. Therefore, to rephrase Kangrga, this politician “was only a Serb, and not yet a human”.<sup>6</sup> The degree to which the apolitical core of humaneness directs one’s actions and judgments is decisive in determining whether someone should be described as a *čovjek* (a good, decent human being). This *čovjek* did not have to be morally perfect, since making mistakes is considered to be a fully human characteristic, as

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<sup>4</sup> “Biti samo Hrvat – znači još ne biti čovjek. [...] Nacionalist je nezreli čovjek”. Available at: <http://pescanik.net/2010/06/o-nacionalizmu-2> (accessed 19 June 2015).

<sup>5</sup> In the original, Kangrga writes: “Dakle, kada nisi u sebi imao dostatne snage da postaješ čovjekom (jer to je mukotran proces koji traje čitava života!)...” Available at: <http://pescanik.net/2010/06/o-nacionalizmu-2> (accessed 19 June 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Developing strong criticism of nationalism, Kangrga continues his reasoning: being a good member of a national collective means being kind to oneself, one’s fellow nationals, and hence to one’s nation. In order to be a good national, one can even do evil to members of other nations, and still remain a good national: “This is why, in all probability, we should not really overly boast about our ‘good Croatianhood, but should work long and hard to become, as soon as possible, – good people, if we ever manage!”. Available at: <http://pescanik.net/2010/06/o-nacionalizmu-2> (accessed on 19 June 2015).

long as the mistakes were small and the person in question made efforts to develop their humaneness further.

## DEPOLITICIZATION “FROM ABOVE”

Techniques of depoliticization and naturalization of power inequalities have been at the centre of anthropological research of politics for a long time, often developing from Foucault’s (1995, 2003, 2007) understanding of politics and power. First, depoliticization was interpreted through the image of an “anti-politics machine” in relationship to development (Ferguson 1990). This refers to the process through which the state and international developmental agencies transform deep political questions about the socio-economic organization of a polity into purely technical and bureaucratic issues, which could be resolved by better organized, better planned, and better funded projects of reform:

Casting themselves in the role of politically-neutral artisans using “development” projects as tools to grab hold of and transform a portion of the country according to a pre-determined plan, “development” officials assumed that the projects were givens and all they had to do was “implement” them. [...] Needing to construe their role as “apolitical”, they continued to see government as a machine for delivering services, not a political fact or means by which certain classes and interests attempted to control the behaviour and choices of others. (Ferguson 1994: 178–179)

Anthropological criticism has pointed out that developmental “depoliticization from above” makes structural inequalities invisible, undermines political imagination, and often results in fewer people having more power than before the process of reform (Mitchell 2002). Depoliticizing technological and managerial solutions of developmental problems often serve the interests of the existing national and international elites.

Second, depoliticization was criticized in relationship to the distinction between the public and private spheres of a Western European bourgeois society. Here, depoliticization refers to a strategy through which issues such as gender, family, sexuality, kinship, or intimacy were positioned as private, and therefore of no political concern (see, for instance, Fraser 2005). Such depoliticization of the “private” kept large groups of people powerless and excluded from the public discussions about how a polity should be organized, including all those who presumably did not possess personal skills necessary to engage in a rational, impassionate exchange of arguments – that is, women, non-white or non-straight people, workers, etc. (Warner 2002).

The second wave of feminist criticisms pointed out that “the personal is political”, or, in other words, that there are no “apolitical” arenas of human experience. Here, the “political” is understood “as having to do with power relationships, not the narrow sense of electoral politics” (Hanisch 2006: 1). Communitarian criticisms pointed out that values and ideas about a good life should also be matters of political concern (Benhabib 1997). And so forth.

Third, depoliticization was approached in relationship to transnational humanitarianism and its principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and universality, which were explicitly articulated for the first time by the International Committee of the Red Cross in the 1960s (Barnett 2011). Since the motivation for humanitarian acts is supposed to be based on those principles, rather than on interests, the ICRC perceived politics as a “moral pollutant” for humanitarianism (ibid.). Such positioning of humanitarianism vis-à-vis politics has been questioned by humanitarian actors themselves in the last two decades, especially since the “Rwandan genocide shattered humanitarianism’s self-confidence in its own virtue and opened the floodgates to critical interpretations” (Barnett and Weiss 2008: 6). Barnett and Weiss suggest that post-Cold war transnational humanitarianism is stricken by a profound “ontological insecurity”, exemplified by ongoing debates over its purposes, principles, and politics:

over the last twenty years global developments, such as the growing prominence of states in relief-oriented activities and the proliferation of postconflict operations, have weakened once reasonably settled distinctions between humanitarianism and other areas of social life. Boundaries blur as aid agencies perform functions once viewed as the domain of the state and states perform functions once viewed as the domain of relief agencies. (2008: 5)

Importantly, this struggle to redefine who humanitarians are, what they do and with what consequences does not seem to threaten the existence of humanitarianism, since it has been followed hand in hand by an increasing international support to and wider scope of transnational humanitarian activities (ibid.). Anthropological engagements with humanitarianism have critically explored the effects of its depoliticization. Humanitarianism is discussed as a particular “politics of life” in which human life depends on someone’s personal compassion, reasoning, and good will (Fassin 2009, 2012). Although humanitarian actors nominally aspire to protect human lives regardless of socio-political identities (such as ethno-nationality, citizenship, religion, gender, age, and so forth), the relationship between humanitarianism, politics, and power is very complex in practice (Bornstein and Redfield 2011). For instance, in order to be able to conduct their work, humanitarian actors have to differentiate between “those who need saving” and “those



who save". Under certain conditions, they have to value the lives of these two groups of people differently (Fassin 2007). Ethno-national and geopolitical markers often overlap with this distinction between the "savers" and the "saved" (Coles 2007). Furthermore, the depoliticization of humanitarianism was criticized for further violating those who are already suffering by taking away their voices and reducing them to representatives of bare life (Malkki 1995, 1996; Rajaram 2002). Finally, despite the claims of proceduralism, state institutions occasionally adopt the humanitarian logic of compassion in their treatment of immigrants (Ticktin 2011) or people who need medical support beyond its borders (Brković 2014).

These three broad directions of criticism frame depoliticization as a process which prevents fairer redistribution of power.<sup>7</sup> The instances of depoliticization in 20<sup>th</sup>-century development and in 19<sup>th</sup>-century nationally-bound bourgeois politics were criticized as strategies through which the more powerful groups had reproduced and strengthened their positions in the existing socio-political and economic hierarchies. The humanitarian principle of neutrality is criticized by humanitarian actors because it could harm people who need protection, whereas critical social theory pointed out that humanitarian projects often reproduce partial and unjust forms of governance, such as "adhocracy", "a form of power that creates chaos and vulnerability as much as it creates order" (Dunn 2012: 2). Problems of those who need humanitarian aid are often aggravated by the aleatory, ad hoc, and chaotic responses of humanitarian agencies (Dunn and Cons 2014).<sup>8</sup> The implication of such criticisms is that the oppressed and the powerless have a significant interest in denouncing depoliticization: if inequalities and injustices which are reproduced by different depoliticizing moral and technical-expert discourses are redefined as political problems, then that could open up a space for discussion of more just frameworks for governmental, developmental, or humanitarian interventions.

## DEPOLITICIZATION "FROM BELOW"

Less analytical attention has been dedicated to the situations in which people who engage in depoliticization may be located in the lower echelons of the existing socio-political hierarchies, or those who presumably "need

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<sup>7</sup> Similar criticisms are offered in relationship to other arenas of social life, including policy. See Shore and Wright (1997), Clarke et al. (2015).

<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, in her analysis of the treatment of internally displaced people in Georgia, Dunn (2012) argues that humanitarian projects were largely founded on "satisficing" – making fast choices that appeared to be good enough, rather than contextually specific responses to the actual needs of people who needed humanitarian aid.

saving". For instance, Mina, a university student and a friend of Milica's sister, raised money at the university and organized a humanitarian football tournament and a humanitarian concert in Bijeljina to help Milica. Discussing her humanitarian engagements, Mina said that people in BiH help through humanitarian actions, "because they are poor and they know what it is like when a person is in need". In her view, "a donation will be given by poor people, rather than by rich ones, because they know what it is like when there is not enough money". She illustrated this with the example of her grandmother who regularly gave donations to various humanitarian actions, in contrast to her university professor who gave a 50KM paper bill during a humanitarian fundraiser for Milica's sister, but requested 40KM change from Mina. Mina added: "We show solidarity in scarcity, in poverty, because we all know what that is like". She also said that she was "angry at the state" (*ljuta na državu*), because the state abandoned her friend, and stated that the state should establish a fund to take care of people who need expensive medical treatments abroad. Yet, for Mina, none of this was closely related to politics. The professor was not "a good human", the state was ignorant, and *politika* could not help her friend get a bone-marrow transplant in Vienna. What motivation would people like Mina, Milica, Ana, or Marko have to frame a humanitarian need as an apolitical issue? One possibility is to look at depoliticization as a strategy. For instance, Helms suggests that a woman in BiH who was engaged in humanitarian and NGO work:

readily acknowledged to me that her goal was political and that she and her organization were counting on the prejudices of local male politicians to allow them to achieve their political goals through nominally nonpolitical channels available to women. [...] She was quite aware of the way she was playing with other people's assumptions about women's political insignificance in order to achieve her very political goals. (2003: 26)

Furthermore, various returnees in BiH have used the concept of *pošteni ljudi* (honest, respectable humans) in a similar manner. Kolind writes that Bosniak returnees to Stolac, a small BiH town with a Bosnian Croat majority, evoked the imagery of *pošteni ljudi* "to disapprove of actions and people without resorting to the dominant ideology of ethnicity as an explanatory framework" (Kolind 2008: 140, see also Jansen 2006a, 2006b, 2007). In other words, the seemingly apolitical concept of *pošteni ljudi* was used to interpret actions and events in terms other than ethno-national: someone behaved in a certain way not because she was a Bosniak/Croat/Serb, but because she was (not) a decent human being. There was a structural reason for this: Bosniak returnees in Stolac were in a structurally weak position vis-à-vis the new local governance structures in the town, which were dominated by Croatian

nationalist parties (see also Kolind 2007). The concept of *pošteni ljudi* was used to legitimize "national coexistence" and thereby the returnees' presence in various places in BiH.

Such, more or less intentional, attempts to depoliticize one's goals, social positions, and practices can be interpreted as political acts, if politics is understood as an inherent feature of social relations,<sup>9</sup> rather than as a separate field of practice, or as an autonomous arena of experience (see Butler 1993, 2004, 2010). Although there are very different conceptions of politics (and although various people become excluded from them), no human relationship or practice could be placed outside of the category of the political as such. As Butler (2011) suggests,

even the life stripped of rights is still within the sphere of the political, and is thus not reduced to mere being, but is, more often than not, angered, indignant, rising up and resisting. To be outside established and legitimate political structures is still to be saturated in power relations, and this saturation is the point of departure for a theory of the political that includes dominant and subjugated forms, modes of inclusion and legitimation as well as modes of delegitimation and effacement.<sup>10</sup>

In my understanding of Butler's work, politics refers to a particular redistribution of the ability to live a good life and presents a dimension of any social encounter. Fraser (2010) suggests that the ability to live a good life is shaped by conditions under which it is possible to become a subject who is recognized by others (recognition), by regimes of allocation of resources which are required by the materiality of a human body, with all of its needs and specificities (redistribution), as well as by an ability to one's own points of view (representation). Fraser (2010) also notices that modern states developed different arenas for shaping these three broad directions, whereby recognition is primarily a matter of "culture", redistribution of "economy", and representation of (party) "politics". Creating a distinct sphere of "economy" (or "culture") as separate from "politics" has been critically discussed in social sciences (see, for instance, Mitchell 2002; Wright 1998). Ideas about *politika* in BiH indicate that similar criticisms could be directed to the framing of politics as a separate sphere inhabited primarily by political parties, associations, and voters.

Namely, in (post)Yugoslav, and especially in BiH frameworks, *politika* is understood as an "immoral sphere populated by self-interested politicians organized through parties" (Jansen 2015: 192). As Helms writes,

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<sup>9</sup> This refers to "face to face" social relations, as well as to those mediated via bureaucracies.

<sup>10</sup> Available at: <http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en> (accessed 18 June 2015).

Ordinary Bosnians generally view politics with a large dose of scepticism, except often in cases when they see party policies as supporting their interests. Politicians are derided as corrupt schemers, only out for personal gain and engaged in dark deals and morally compromising activities. (2007: 238)

The depoliticization of humanitarian actions took place in relationship to this hegemonic understanding of *politika*. A universalist discourse of humaneness (*ljudskost*) was used in humanitarian actions to make claims to survival and wellbeing which could not be made otherwise.

### **DEPOLITICIZATION FROM BELOW AS A WAY TO MAKE CLAIMS THAT HAVE NO NAME**

The prevalence of the ethno-national logic in the organization of the BiH politics, state administration, and social life has been extensively criticized. For instance, Mujkić suggests that BiH can be understood as an ethnopolis, that is, as:

a community characterized by the political priority of the ethnic group(s) over the individual that is implemented through democratic self-legislation, and a community characterized by the political priority of the ethnic group's right to self-determination over the citizen's right to self-determination where the citizen's membership in a political community is determined by her or his membership in an ethnic community. (2007: 116)

While the Dayton Agreement fixed the power-sharing regulations under which the posts in the tripartite Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the House of Peoples were reserved for Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), Bosnian Serbs, and Bosnian Croats, the logic of such regulations was not specific to BiH (see Bougarel et al. 2007; Duijzings 2003).<sup>11</sup> As a matter of fact, such identity politics "is fast becoming the paradigmatic form of political conflict in the late twentieth century" (Fraser 1997: 11). The contemporary globally dominant mode of political struggle is "not between 'classes' but between 'cultural groups'", which have been mobilized "under the banners of nationality, ethnicity, 'race', gender, and sexuality" (ibid.). In other words, problems of redistribution (political and economic restructuring, reorganization of the

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<sup>11</sup> The European Court of Human Rights decided that these regulations violate the European Convention on Human Rights in a famous case, *Sejdić and Finci vs BiH*, in 2009. However, since the change of these regulations would require a change of the BiH Constitution, which would mean opening up a number of very sensitive issues (including the current administrative organization of the country), the ruling has not really affected everyday practice.

division of labor, and so forth) are often sidelined in favor of problems of recognition (cultural and symbolic representation of various senses of self).

This global "shift in the grammar of political claims-making means" (Fraser 1997: 2) was also reflected in the ideas about *politika* and *humanitarne akcije* in BiH. Politicians were often derided with regard to humanitarian actions, particularly vociferously by the host of a TV and radio show "Udri muški", Almir Čehajić Batko. Airing on weekdays for two hours during my fieldwork, this TV and radio show was almost solely dedicated to the humanitarian actions. The host, Batko, presented people who initiated humanitarian actions, publicized their humanitarian phone numbers and bank accounts, and followed up their stories during and after the medical treatment abroad. In his narrative, politicians were clearly contrasted to the "army of good humans". In a media interview, Batko said:

This is the country of the most hardcore criminals, because those who drive 200.000KM [app. 100.000 EUR] cars have allowed children to die, because they don't have money for medical treatment. We see this every day and all of them are our children [...] People in the government are not aware how expensive it is to take from the poor and to gain enormous wealth in this way. This is how several generations of citizens of this country are being destroyed [...] an army of good humans responds to each [humanitarian] action, and politicians never do.<sup>12</sup>

From this perspective, politicians, as those who are engaged in *politika*, do not really know or care about the poverty and hardship that families who need humanitarian aid have to endure. The "criminals who drive 200.000KM cars" were politicians' friends, if not politicians themselves, not just in Batko's narrative, but also in the narratives of most of my interlocutors and, in many cases, in everyday life. As a corrupt and dodgy arena for managing relationships between ethno-national identities, *politika* – with its political parties, elections, multiple BiH governments and ministries – was mostly concerned with identity recognition. Therefore, *politika* could not encompass problems, experiences, needs, and aspirations of people who needed humanitarian aid.

Milica, Mina, Ana, Marko and many other people did not see or present their humanitarian engagements as political, because this practice was incompatible with the ethno-national rhetoric, or identity-based divisions. This does not mean that people who organized humanitarian actions, or those who helped them, were anti-nationalists, or that they engaged in a politics of difference. Indeed, a few of them were anti-nationalists, but many others were nationalists, sometimes hard-core ones. Instead, it means that

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<sup>12</sup> The interview is available at: <http://dobro.ba/2010/05/28/drzava-uzima-novac-od-humanitarnih-akcija/> (accessed 18 June 2015).

people involved in *humanitarne akcije* could not express their problems, or make their claims to survival and wellbeing, by evoking the ethno-nationalist idiom. Their problem was that the existing public healthcare system could not provide the necessary healthcare service to their family members, or finance it abroad. This had very little to do with *politika* being understood as the management of ethno-national groups which is primarily motivated by self-interest. But it had a lot to do with politics being understood as a particular redistribution of the ability to live a good life. Therefore, the apolitical concept of humaneness in humanitarian actions in 2009 and 2010 offered a way to distance oneself from the dominant understanding of *politika*, while at the same time opening up the space to make political claims for which there was almost no other available register.

## SHARED FRAMEWORKS AND POINTS OF DISCONTENT

In humanitarian actions, the obligation to give to a family in need was interpreted through a number of socio-moral frameworks, such as nationality, religion, universal humanity, or local relations (Brković 2014). As a country in which legacies of socialism, nationalism, and the democratic and market-based logics “coexist and operate in uneasy combinations” (Gilbert 2006: 15), it is not surprising that people expressed their moral obligation to give in various ways. One point on which many of my interlocutors seemed to agree was that “the state”, or “the system”, had a fair share of responsibility for the misfortune of the family in question. I heard more than once that a “normal country” would take care of its citizens, so that the family would not have to raise money via a humanitarian action. This, however, was not interpreted as political criticism.

Some of my interlocutors claimed that it almost did not really matter who was in power, because different politicians and political parties “would do the same”. While we were talking about this topic, Milan (the young man mentioned at the beginning of the paper) cited a popular saying: “Comrade Tito stole and gave to the people, these [politicians] steal and do not give anything to the people” (*Drug Tito je krao i narodu dao, ovi krađu i narodu ne daju*). With this, he suggested that politicians have been, and will continue to be, corrupt. The issue is not whether the next generation of politicians will be corrupt (because they would), but how well “the people” will live under them. Importantly, he did not think that there was a qualitative difference between *politika* in BiH and elsewhere. The key difference for him was that, in “happy countries” (*srećne zemlje*), the “system” kept the politicians under control, prevented corruption, and fostered “normal” ethno-national

relations. Thus, Milan thought that *politika* and politicians were essentially the same everywhere – resembling a game among mischievous and selfish children who needed the “system” to supervise them.

These sorts of dissatisfactions and criticisms of the “country”, the “state”, and the “system” did not present a conceptual or practical challenge to the organization of life in BiH, largely because they depended on the hegemonic notions of *politika*. Roseberry suggests that a hegemonic process works by constructing “not a shared ideology but a common material and meaningful framework for living through, talking about, and acting upon social orders characterized by domination” (1994: 361). In line with this, my interlocutors did not necessarily agree with various elements of politics in BiH. They even strongly criticized the postwar conditions which pushed so many families to rely on humanitarian help in order to access healthcare. However, in doing so, they reproduced the dominant perception of *politika* as a morally dirty playground for managing ethno-national relations.

Taking this into account, it is perhaps not surprising that it was not a humanitarian action, but an ethno-national administrative problem, which provoked public protests in 2013 (which *did* pose a conceptual and practical challenge to the organization of life in BiH). Namely, in January 2013, BiH administrative offices stopped issuing ID numbers, because the existing Law on Personal ID Numbers was suspended and a new one could not be adopted. The adoption of the new Law was prevented because of a disagreement over whether entity borders should be reflected in a digit denoting the region in the 13-digit number, or not. Thus, “the adoption of the JMBG law [i.e. the Personal ID number law] became yet another dispute over the centralisation vs. decentralisation of the state, and a tool for accomplishing the narrow interests of Bosnian politicians from both entities” (Armakolas and Maksimović 2013: 4). The consequences of the dispute over numbers were dire:

Public discontent about this legal loophole increased when a seriously ill 3-month old girl, Belmina Ibrišević, needed to leave the country to get an urgent medical treatment, but her travelling abroad was impossible, since a valid passport could not be issued without a citizen ID number. Days later, another baby, Berina Hamidović, died in a hospital in Belgrade after the medical treatment she needed was delayed due to a series of bureaucratic obstructions caused by the lack of an ID number. (Armakolas and Maksimović 2013: 5)

The protests were not provoked by ongoing humanitarian actions for Belmina Ibrišević and Berina Hamidović, but by the entry of *politika* into administrative procedures. In other words, the very need to start humanitarian actions may have been infuriating for many, but a humanitarian issue was

interpreted as a matter of political concern only once *politika* was directly responsible for the misfortune. Numerous criticisms, voiced by my interlocutors, of the "situation", the "country", and the "system" which pushed people to start humanitarian actions did not really usurp the hegemonic understanding of what a legitimate political issue was.

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## **DEPOLITIZACIJA "ODOZDO": SVAKODNEVNA HUMANITARNOST U BOSNI I HERCEGOVINI**

Ovaj rad propituje kako je granica između humanitarnosti i politike bila reproducirana u svakodnevnom životu jednoga grada u BiH. Rad istražuje kako su tijekom humanitarnih akcija korištene (post)jugoslavenske ideje o ljudskosti kao apolitičkoj jezgri koja je omotana slojevima društveno-političkih identiteta. U radu se sugerira da je depolitiziranje humanitarnih akcija omogućavalo da se osoba distancira od hegemonijskog razumijevanja politike kao upravljanja etno-nacionalnim grupama motiviranog prije svega osobnim interesima, a da istodobno artikulira svoje zahtjeve i potrebe. Ljudi kojima je bila potrebna humanitarna pomoć koristili su depolitizirajuće diskurse o ljudskosti kako bi izrazili svoje (političko) pravo na preživljavanje i blagostanje u kontekstu obilježenom dominantnošću etno-nacionalističke retorike.

Ključne riječi: humanitarnost, depolitizacija, preraspodjela, prepoznavanje, Bosna i Hercegovina